

Teaching Muslim Girls in American Schools

By Awatif Elnour and Khadar Bashir-Ali

Changing demographics and immigration patterns have brought increasing numbers of Muslim students into American schools. Often, teachers in the United States know little about the norms of Islam or the cultures of Muslim students. Yet without informed and empathetic teachers, Muslim girls find themselves marginalized by struggles between the norms of the classroom, curriculum, and school and those of their family, religion, and ethnic communities. As Muslim women educators who have lived in the United States for more than a decade, we have seen firsthand the problems many Muslim girls and women face in American educational institutions. In this article, we use our experiences and those of others to discuss how American teachers can improve the educational experiences of Muslim girls. We acknowledge that although the patterns we describe apply to most Muslim women living in the United States, variations from cultural group to cultural group exist in the practice of the Muslim religion here, just as they do with any faith.

Diversity Within the Muslim World

All Muslims are not the same. Islam has distinct branches; the major ones are the majority Sunni group and the Shiite group. American Muslims are not all from the Middle East, nor are they all Arab.¹ The country of origin of Muslim immigrants may be Bosnia, Turkey, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Iran, Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia, or many others. Muslims share the same religious practices and beliefs, yet they have distinctive cultural differences that influence their life-styles and worldviews. Within Islamic countries, one can find differences in behavioral norms for women because the ways in which women abide by Islamic principles often differ based on the economic status of their family, ethnic beliefs, and rural/urban differences. Because of the different culturally based ways in which Muslim girls and women express themselves, American teachers may not even recognize some of their students as Muslim, seeing them simply as Nigerian, Bosnian, or Turkish. This lack of knowledge may impede teachers' abilities to treat female Muslim students in a culturally sensitive fashion.

Islamic Dress

Diversity of norms for Muslim girls is evident when we look at how girls from different countries dress. In Columbus, Ohio, schools recently, we saw a Bosnian girl wearing jeans and a shirt just as any American teenager might, a Pakistani girl wearing a traditional *surwaal-khamiis* without a head covering, and Somali girls wearing clearly distinguishable long dresses covering their entire body. Muslim females who observe Islamic dress codes when they reach puberty must cover their hair and entire body except their faces, hands, and feet. The degree of covering, however, depends on their culture and their families' interpretation of the religion.

A classroom teacher, Stan Karp, has described these differences among his Bengali Muslim students: "Some, like Jihana, covered their heads with scarves in keeping with Muslim tradition. A few wore the full veil. Others wore no special dress."² What the girls wear at home or with other females may differ from what they perceive as proper dress in the presence of men. Although Islamic rules dictate that women should be decent and reasonably covered, Muslim girls and women implement these rules in different ways.

Islamic dress codes always conflict with what is normally worn by American girls for physical education classes. Muslim girls who follow these codes cannot wear shorts and short-sleeved T-shirts. We know of teachers who lower Muslim girls' grades because they consider them to be disregarding the rules by covering their bodies. For example, one teacher was adamant that her Muslim female students would fail if they did not wear the required shorts, even though they did participate in class activities. The parents of the girls were concerned that this particular teacher

wanted to change their daughter. In a conference, the teacher and parents listened to each other's demands and worked out a compromise to let the young women wear loose sweatpants for the class. This resolved the problem, but if the teacher had been aware of the needs of Muslim girls, the student could have been spared the experience of being singled out for punishment in front of her peers. Unfortunately, most schools experience a few such incidents, which produce unhappy Muslim girls and parents, until the staff takes cultural differences into consideration.

The Invisibility of Muslim Girls

"When I went to my school no one talked to me. It was like I didn't exist," says one youngster from Afghanistan.³ Muslim girls are often invisible in American schools. Culturally conditioned to stay separated from the whole group, they may choose to sit in the back of the classroom with the hope that no one will notice them. They tend to cluster with girls of their own ethnic group, among whom they feel safe. Teachers can help Muslim girls become visible by making them feel understood and appreciated.

The social studies curriculum may also affect Muslim girls' invisibility. All too often we have heard comments such as the following: "Have you ever heard Americans teach about the Crusades? Muslims are bad, and the Christians are good. I wanted to stay home for weeks because every time she taught about Muslims, they all looked at me as one of those bad Muslims." Teachers need to examine the curriculum for biases against Muslims and be conscious of how Muslim girls may be hurt by stereotypes about Muslim women.

Teachers also need to understand expectations for Muslim girls at home. These young women may come to school unprepared because they work very long hours taking care of siblings and doing housework. As a result, teachers may misjudge Muslim girls, labeling them as lazy or punishing them for things beyond their control. Talking with parents about their educational goals for their daughters may provide insights for both parents and teachers that can improve

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Muslim girl in an American high school

understanding and fairness. Such conversations will also help educate Muslim parents about American schools' expectations for all their students—male and female.

Negotiating Other School Norms

Many Muslim families do not allow their daughters to participate in extracurricular activities or after-school enrichment programs. Muslim girls' household responsibilities often preclude such attendance, and their parents feel they are safer at home. Muslim families also prefer that their daughters not discuss family issues, peer relations, or dating with teachers or counselors. Although knowledgeable school counselors and English as a Second Language specialists may play a role in helping teachers see the impact of background, culture, and religion on Muslim girls' behavior and academic study, many Muslim parents prefer to provide their own counsel to their daughters in order to maintain their own cultural and religious values.

Food restrictions also present challenges for Muslim students in American schools. Practicing Muslims do not eat pork, and any pork by-product is strictly forbidden. School administrators and support staff such as cafeteria workers need to be aware of these restrictions.

All Muslims are required to perform daily prayers at five specific times during the day. School timetables do not accommodate Muslims who wish to follow this injunction. Teachers and school officials should be aware that Muslim girls may seek out a place where they can pray privately during school hours.

Muslim Girls' Interactions with Males

Conservative Muslim girls follow cultural norms that prevent them from interacting freely with persons of the opposite sex. These norms may result in behavior that can be misinterpreted as a lack of engagement in normal school and classroom activities. For example, Muslim girls may lower their gaze and not look directly into the eyes of male teachers. This reflects a Qur'anic verse: "Tell the believing women to lower their gaze and not to show their adornment except only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bodies" (Surah An-Nur, Verse 31). Teachers may misinterpret this lack of eye contact as boredom, lack of engagement, or lack of attention and respect.

Many Muslim girls are also conditioned to speak in soft tones in front of men. When called upon in class, they may speak very softly and feel timid as they respond to a male teacher. They may avoid situations that bring them into direct interaction with males, such as meeting alone



Reuters/Mike Segar

with a male teacher, playing games, or engaging in extracurricular activities.

Many Muslim girls and women will not shake hands with boys or men, because they do not touch or allow themselves to be touched by a person of the opposite sex. In a recent honors assembly at a local school, the principal extended his hand to all the students as they came forward to accept their awards. Most of the Muslim girls, however, did not shake the principal's hand because they had been taught by their parents not to touch a male. Since the principal was knowledgeable about Muslim norms, the ceremony proceeded smoothly. Unfortunately, if teachers are not familiar with the norms of behavior of Muslim students, they may make Muslim girls feel awkward or humiliated for following their religious beliefs.

Muslim Girls and Dating

Most Muslim parents hold conservative views regarding relationships between the sexes. Many Muslims prohibit their children from spending any time alone with members of the opposite sex. Most Muslims disapprove of dating, because Western dating practices are viewed as incompatible with Islamic values. Muslims regard their conservative values as safeguarding the family and building respect for people based on their personal qualities rather than on physical attraction. Both girls and boys are expected to adhere to these restrictions as soon as they reach the puberty stage, but due to the patriarchal nature of Muslim society, girls face more restrictions than do boys.

Because of these beliefs, Muslim girls will often refuse to participate in proms, dating, and

A group of young Muslim girls carry American flags during the 14th annual Muslim Day Parade on Madison Avenue in New York, September 29, 2002. Several thousand people took part in the celebration of Islamic culture in America.

other activities that require free mixing of the sexes. Many traditional Muslim parents also attempt to arrange marriages for their children.

Some Islamic cultures encourage females to marry at an early age while others do not. Early marriage is usually based on strong cultural predispositions, as parents believe that the marriage of their daughters will prevent them from bringing shame to the family. Girls, in turn, may look forward to this day of freedom from their family when they can claim the opportunity to start their own households. Parents do not see this phenomenon as detrimental to their children, but view it as a form of life insurance. "My daughter is well off now, she is no longer under my responsibility. Now I can die in peace and I know I took care of my children," said one mother. This mother saw the marriage as a way of protecting her daughter from damage to her reputation, and a transfer of responsibility to a husband who will take care of her daughter.

In families that prefer their daughters to marry young, girls are likely to leave school when they get married. Dropping out of school, however, presents obvious concerns for educators, because these girls enter into marriage without being prepared for life in a Western context. We believe that a compromise must be arranged in such a way that these girls can continue with their education while preserving their right to adhere to their cultural norms.⁴

Conclusion

Teachers need to interpret American life for Muslim students and their families while facilitating and guaranteeing Muslim girls' access to an education that will empower them. In teaching Muslim girls, we need to recognize the following:

- All Muslim children are not from the same place or the same culture.
- The behavior and demeanor of Muslim girls may be quite different from that of other girls in the class.
- Body language and eye contact must be understood within its cultural and religious context.
- Muslim girls do not date and mix with the opposite sex in the same way as their non-Muslim counterparts.
- Invisibility and marginalization in classrooms may result from teachers' lack of understanding of Muslim girls' religion and culture; if teachers gain knowledge, they can help Muslim girls negotiate the demands of both home and school.
- Islamic dress codes require clothing that often differs from the norms of physical education classes; practical accommodations can be made by schools for Muslim girls.
- Dietary and food restrictions should be respected by schools. 🍴

Useful Teaching Resources

The Institute of Islamic Information and Education, P.O. Box 41129, Chicago, IL 60641. This institute is dedicated to providing correct information about Islam to Americans.

Council on Islamic Education: www.cie.org

Jannah: www.jannah.org/sisters
Numerous articles written by and about Muslim women.

Soundvision: www.soundvision.com

A site for American Muslims that has resources and ideas to help Muslim parents better inform schools and teachers about issues of concern to Muslim parents. A listserv offers a message to subscribers with new resources provided every week.

United Muslim Women Association, *Islamic Young People: An Introductory Resources Guide to Islam and Muslim Communities* (1999).

The Noble Qur'an, English translation of meaning and commentary, King Fahd Complex for printing of Holy Qur'an, Medinah, Saudi Arabia.

Muslim students in public schools: www.hamline.edu/graduate/graded/degreeprogram/multiculturalism/muslim.html, www.islamfortoday.com

Notes

1. There are many Christian Arabs in the United States. They are often from Palestine, Lebanon, or Egypt.

2. Stan Karp, "Arranged Marriages, Rearranged Ideas," *Rethinking Schools* 2 11, no. 2 (1996/97): 1, 6-7.
3. Sue Brooks, *Invisible Children in the Society and Its Schools* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), xix.
4. We recommend that teachers read the article noted in note 2 by Stan Karp on a teacher's interaction with his Muslim students and their arranged marriages.

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